“My Reading Rainbow”

A Literacy Autobiography

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(HWP 2011)

“Take a look inside a book, The Reading Rainbow”. As I type those words, the too familiar song resonates in my mind. As a child, even before I could decipher the black and white words that filled the pages of a book, I loved this show. I was fascinated by the different places and people one could encounter through the reading rainbow. With that, I often asked for books to read and the mini-library in my home became my resource for reading. As a child, my mind was captivated and stimulated by the antics of Dr. Seuss, the wild adventures of Brer Rabbit, the innocence of Winnie the Pooh, the familial bond of the Berenstein Bears, the sing-a-longs of the Mickey Mouse Club , and the moral lessons of Sesame Street. My reading rainbow was full of color and I challenged myself to make it as bright as possible. My love seemed to come naturally. I yearned for the fun and excitement I experienced through cartoons, movies, and read alouds and I discovered that I could have it through reading. Although encouraged by my parents and teachers, I cannot attribute this love to one person or thing. Nevertheless, I became an avid reader and loved immersing myself in the words that created vivid pictures of places and characters that I’d grown to know and love just through reading about them.

Well, I learned that you cannot have a rainbow without rain and I would consider high school my years of rain when it came to reading and writing. Although my passion for reading was ever-present at home and in school during my elementary and middle school years, this drastically changed during high school. With the shift from private to public schooling, my development as a reader was not fostered by my teachers who seemed frustrated and unenthused about the day to day requirements of teaching. I remember reading pieces from Shakespeare and being thoroughly confused with the language and lack of explanation or discussion on the part of my teacher. Although English was still my favorite subject, I found myself exploring authors and different pieces of literature outside of the classroom. This is when I met and fell in love with the author, Toni Morrison. We had not read or even learned much about African-Americans as writers, therefore, experiencing her use of language and in-depth depictions of characters fostered a desire and a passion to not only read more, but to write. She created characters and described places that I knew or could connect with and this made it all the more intriguing to me. Thus, my conversation with characters commenced. I began journaling about not only my independent readings, but the readings assigned in class. I learned that I could learn from others writing and in responding to their characters, thoughts, and ideas I was essentially becoming a writer myself. High school was finished and although the experience had somewhat smothered my passion, I found in college that the clouds would disperse and life would once again be captivated with colors.

My advisor in college was an older, white man who I believed would have no interest in making a connection with me socially or academically. I had graduated from high school having only one white teacher and he taught Math, a subject that I detested and held no interest in. Therefore, the building of relationships with those who didn’t look or sound like me was an obstacle that presented itself during my adolescence and college forced me to overcome. To my surprise, he never hesitated to learn about me as a student, a person, and most importantly, a writer. He helped me become the writer that I am today through harsh criticisms and fruitful feedback. It certainly took some getting used to, but he taught me how to express myself without speaking, but through writing. He explained that the writer’s responsibility is to make words dance on a page so that the images left with the reader tell a story that they will never forget. To this day, I’m not sure if I’m that creative or moving, but those words he shared resonated with me. In college, I found myself intrigued by the notion of captivity, dehumanization, and slavery. A great deal of my reading focused on African-American authors and their ability to create characters that reflected the development and progression of the African-American race. Prior to this, I engrossed myself in fictional pieces, literature that I was able to dissect and evaluate without fear because it was fiction. However, after taking an African-American Literature course where we were exposed to slave narratives, I became addicted to not only reading various slave narratives, but also to the notion of evaluating them as authentic representations of African-Americans and the struggles there endured to not only free themselves, but to also define themselves and individuals and people. This need to read slave narratives continued into my Master’s program and I found myself consumed with the idea that slavery stripped them of their identity and forced them to redefine themselves once free. This theory was the focus of my Master’s thesis and was based on Frederick Douglass’s “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” and Harriet Ann Jacobs “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”.

As I look back on myself as a learner, reader and writer, it’s not hard to believe that I grew up to be an educator. I was always the student who held high expectations for my teachers and when they did not meet them, I was quick to take my own approach to learning what I needed. However, becoming the reader and writer that I am today was no easy task. The desire to read and write was always there, but the confidence and ability to write developed over time and with copious amounts of reading and reflection. Journaling was my best friend in high school because it allowed me to express myself freely and this helped when I went to college and was forced to write on command, as I liked to call it then. Writing on command was one of the most difficult aspects of writing for me because I usually found myself staring at a blank screen or page unable to formulate my thoughts and ideas in an organized fashion. In taking a composition class, I learned different methods of organizing my thoughts and ideas and was able to develop a more formal and outlined approach to writing which improved my skills and gave me a new purpose and approach to writing. I am now both a reader and a writer and as I continue to read, I continue to write.

It has taken me a while to create the consistent collage of colors that come together in my rainbow, but it has been worth the words and ink. I’m a proclaimed lover of reading and writing because the two are so intricately intertwined in my journey to create my reading rainbow. My reading rainbow is chalked full of my childhood favorites, my high school confusion, and my college passions. The only difference is that those are now joined by my free-writes, ramblings, poetic verses, published thesis, and the barebones chapters of a novel. It goes without saying that one must read to write and my rainbow reflects just that.